

1-1-2018

## The Material Inquiry of Construction

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### Recommended Citation

Scarpa, Lawrence (2018) "The Material Inquiry of Construction," *Oz*: Vol. 40. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1581>

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## The Material Inquiry of Construction

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During the formative years of our practice an unprecedented number of unique work environments were realized in just a few short years. The event of a job coming into the office and its completion occurred with such rapid succession that the energy of the design was naturally sustained through the end of construction, buoyed by the adrenaline that comes from producing at a blistering pace in combination of the direct physical contact with the actual materials of that construction. Our current state of practice is quite different. The size of firm, number of projects, their complexity, and associated duration has all increased. Rather than completing buildings in months, projects now frequently span four, five, or six years from inception to completion. The operative words are now “vigilance,” “diligence,” and “tenacity.”

Despite this shift in the work and process, we remain dedicated to the investigation and exploration of the processes and materials of construction. As philosopher John Dewey described: “inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the situation into a unified whole.”<sup>1</sup> The inventory of what we engage as the “materials of construction” include differentiated sets from the tactility of sanded oriented strand board (OSB); and far more abstract than re-purposed brooms or ping-pong balls deployed as façades that defined the early



work. While previously materials were literally tangible, physical, and visceral, this sensibility has evolved to a broader engagement with social and environmental conditions. The approach declares an optimism and responsibility for materials that are not traditionally about buildings, but nonetheless hold substantial sway over the built environment.

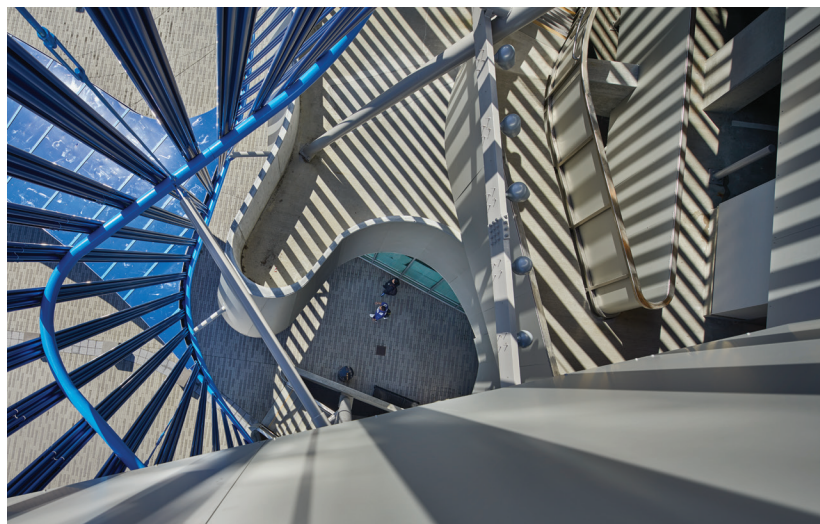
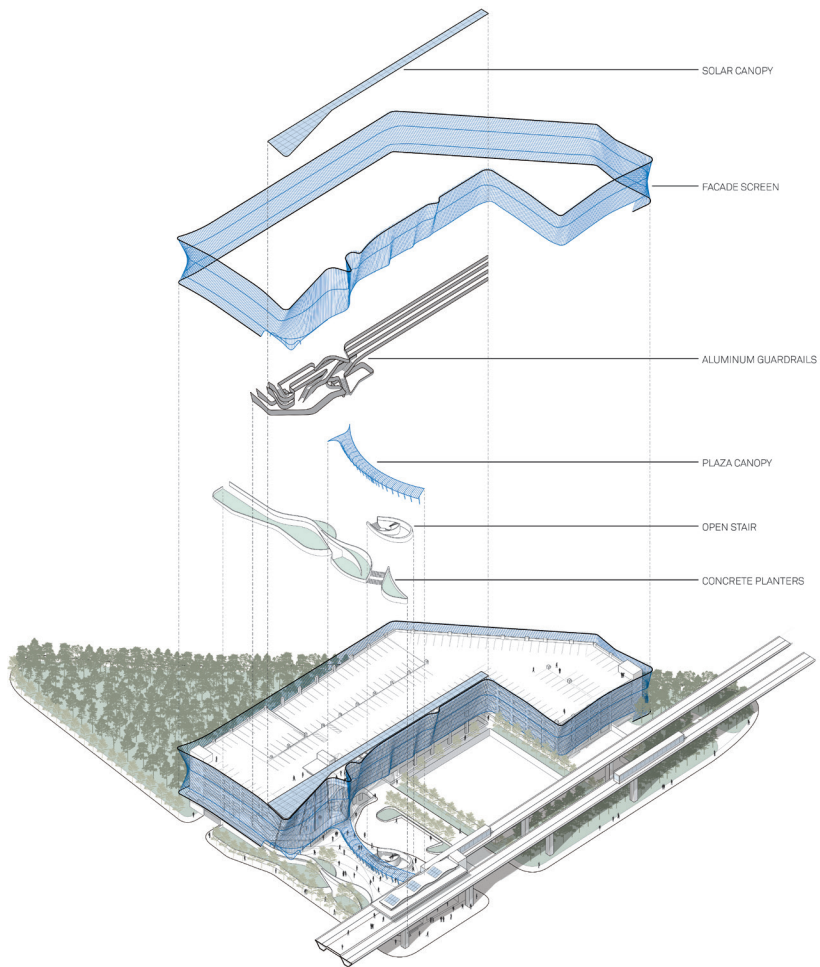
In our earlier projects we brought animation to fairly generic spaces

through the use of common materials reinterpreted and transformed beyond their immediate recognition in the service of a practical, typically programmatic, goal. These projects operated on the principle that the quality of a design is correlated with the dynamic use of materials for effect. An insistence on simplicity and a confidence that the design is emergent from the course of the experiment with the potential to draw sensual qualities from banal materi-

als (typically otherwise overlooked in the day to day) yields an opportunity for invention.

As projects have grown in scale and complexity, our work continues to emphasize the experience of making things. It does not focus on the object, but the process of making it. This methodology results in an awareness of the material and the experience. Drawing on principle belief that the material of the







situation is raw at the outset, the design of a building in service of the public requires an investment in an inclusive and evolutionary process to develop it. “If architecture is completely overwhelmed by politics and absorbed into its processes,” writes Hashim Sarkis in his essay “On the Line Between Procedures and Aesthetics,” “it cannot transform them. In order to become engaged effectively, architects must maintain the strategic possibility of remaining

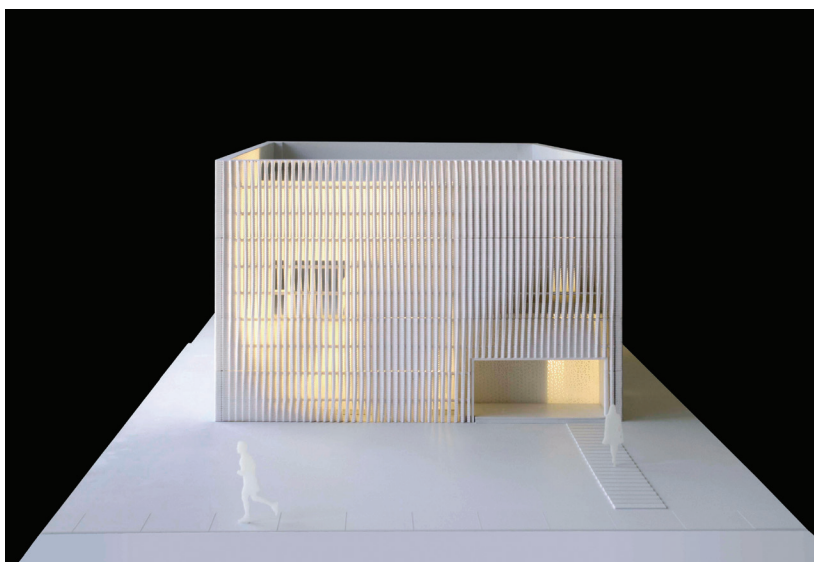
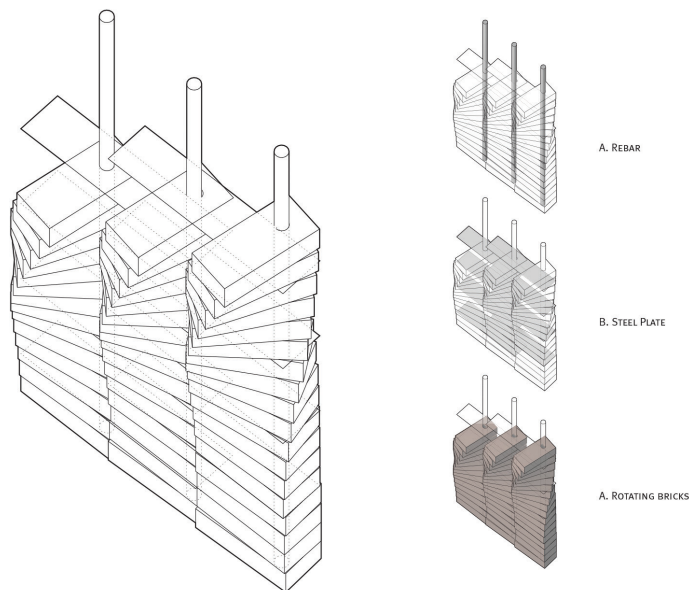
partly disengaged.”<sup>2</sup> One must have the material in hand, to be intimately informed (since disengagement from procedural requirements such as entitlement, permitting, and other approvals is not an option, and, worse yet, amounts to professional incompetence), but the design lies in the orchestrated transformation of that conditional material. Partial disengagement requires working knowledge and also knowledge that may be usefully “suspended” in the

effort to manifest and support our needs as a culture. As Ed Dimendberg writes:

*...from the single-family home with its elaborate codings of public and private to museums with their implicit and explicit relations to notions of heritage and tradition, architecture can never escape the fate of cultural significance. Acknowledging the radically historicist character of architectural knowledge,*

*that our spatial understandings and predilections have a history, that they ceaselessly change, and that the absolute truth remains elusive constitutes [a] requirement for a culturally reflective practice.*<sup>3</sup>

The temporary suspension of our architectural and urbanistic inheritance is fundamental to the process of re-envisioning an improved environment as the forces shaping change in American metropolitan centers goes







beyond the reaches of the discipline of architecture engaging holistically public policy, transportation, public education, and so on. In this light, it is useful to suspend (at least initially) our claim to disciplinary autonomy, forgoing efforts at aesthetic expression in order to engage with the full scope of the conditional “material” and knowing that both historical knowledge and individual authorship will inevitably return.

The premise and process described as “authenticity” and the applied formal manifestation of these methods represent a shared sensibility of approach to the issues described. The attention to material, the engagement of type, and the fundamental subscription to privileging material and process as a mechanism to advance design provides optimistic inquiries for the future of the discipline. The opportunity that this presents to the discipline provides a path forward that is inclusive, expectant, and unique. The conversation provided in these pages challenges us all to pick up the mantle of this framework for the discipline and move forward with its convictions. This emerging practice with the precision of their principles presents an extension of our belief in the opportunity of cultural reflection as a literal material in the design process that must be foregrounded to accomplish the objectives of a contemporary critical practice. Frederick Kiesler once wrote, “Our Western world has been overrun by masses of art objects.” What we need are not more and more objects but an objective.

### Notes

1. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. (New York: Holt, 1938) p.108.
2. Hashim Sarkis, “On the Line Between Procedures and Aesthetics,” in *The Pragmatist Imagination: Thinking About Things in the Making*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), p.103.
3. Ed Dimendberg, *Excluded Middle: Toward a Reflective Architecture and Urbanism*. (Houston: Rice School of Architecture, 2002), p.39.